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UNCLAS YEREVAN 000019

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ARMENIA: INCONSISTENT CLAIMS OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

REF: 04 YEREVAN 1341

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FACTS DON'T ADD UP

1. (SBU) On January 6, Forum 18, a Norwegian NGO, reported that Armen Grigoryan, an Armenian citizen eligible for mandatory military service, had been refused status as a conscientious objector, hazed and forced to serve in Nagorno-Karabakh against his will. Post is investigating the claims made by Forum 18, which has no representation in Armenia, but we cannot substantiate the claims Forum 18 made in its report. A number of discrepancies significantly reduce the story's credibility: the named military prosecutor who allegedly ordered legal proceedings against Grigoryan, Vladik Khachatryan, does not appear to exist. Military sources confirmed that no one by that name works for the Armenian military prosecutor or military police. According to the local leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Grigoryan is neither a member of the church nor in the process of joining.

2. (SBU) According to Armenia's Human Rights Ombudsman Larissa Alaverdian who has been following this case of alleged abuse, Grigoryan responded to his draft notice in May 2004 and requested alternative civilian service. At that time, however, the National Assembly had not yet completed implementation of the new law on alternative military service, nor had it yet created provisions for civilian service (reftel). In August, Grigoryan refused to take an oath of service, and was accused of refusing the order of a superior officer. Shortly thereafter, Grigoryan left his unit without leave, and according to Alaverdian, Grigoryan's father is currently hiding him in Armenia. The Ombudsman's office has followed this case since May, but they have no record of a complaint by Grigoryan alleging abuse in the army as reported by Forum 18.

COMMENT

3. (SBU) Grigoryan may not qualify as a conscientious objector under the new Armenian law because he is not a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses or any other group "holding to a pacifist doctrine." The leader of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia told us that Armen Grigoryan was not a member of their organization nor was he on his way towards membership. The leader also noted that for several years the Jehovah's Witnesses have advised draftees to surrender themselves to police before reporting for military service. This procedure establishes the dissenter as a conscientious objector rather than a deserter subject to military law. Grigoryan's failure to follow this procedure further illustrates his distance from the Jehovah's Witnesses (although Grigoryan's father is a member of the community, Grigoryan himself has not indicated a desire to join the church, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses' leadership). We will continue to follow this case closely.
EVANS